

### 3.

## *A Knack for Survival*



More than four centuries ago, Benvenuto Cellini, that master goldsmith, sculptor, hothead, adventurer, sensualist, braggart, and quintessential Renaissance man, barely escaped from yet another hair-raising scrape in which he'd risked being robbed and perhaps murdered. Right afterward, he tells in his *Life*, he sat down to a merry supper with friends, "laughing over those great blows that Fortune strikes, for good as well as evil, and which, whenever they don't hit the mark, are just the same as though they had never happened."

Cellini's sanguine philosophy that adversity has to be laughed off and that the worst does not always come to pass still distinguishes the Italian character. With their gift for snapping back after catastrophe and for making do with whatever is at hand, the inhabitants of Italy have outlived the fall of the Roman Empire; barbarian invasions; raids by Saracens, Normans, and Turks; incessant wars; communal strife; pestilences and floods; famines and earthquakes—and come out all right again and again, their way of life and their closely knit family structure intact.

One evening in the winter of 1945–46, I took an English journalist friend, Alexander Clifford, to Alfredo's in Rome, then still in its original premises on the Via della Scrofa. The



place was crowded with local people, who all appeared to be in high spirits. Alfredo di Lelio, the owner, personally served us his famous fettuccine, using the gold-plated fork and spoon that he said Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford had given him in the 1930s. The fettuccine came with double portions of butter and was followed by tender artichokes, succulent lamb, and a high-calorie *zuppa inglese*. Clifford, who had been a war correspondent and had just arrived from a dark, hungry, and shivering London, licked the whipped cream from his dessert fork, looked around the room while drinking up the amber Frascati wine before sipping his strong coffee, and asked, "Now, who has won the war?"

Italy, like Britain, had gone through terrifying years—the devastating Allied air raids on industrial centers, railroad hubs, seaports, and eventually on Rome; the naval bombardment of Genoa; the loss of a major part of its merchant fleet and the disaster of the warships sunk in the harbor of Taranto by torpedo-equipped planes; hundreds of thousands of soldiers in prison camps, if not dead; the battles from Sicily to the Po River, with many civilian casualties and innumerable bridges blown up and buildings destroyed; atrocious Nazi reprisals for acts of sabotage and resistance. When the country recovered from World War II with surprising speed, foreigners voiced admiration for the "Italian miracle."

The miracle of Alfredo's fettuccine had been achieved thanks to a flourishing black market that was able to supply high-grade flour stolen from American Liberty ships, and fresh eggs, butter, meat, cream, and Brazilian coffee beans from a variety of sources. The black market was also keeping millions alive who could not afford to dine at Alfredo's. It was operating outside the official rationing system, was completely illegal and at times even criminal, but was widely tolerated and singularly efficient—a convincing demonstration of the Italian talent for survival.

We were halfway through our meal when two men entered the restaurant; the younger one started singing popular Roman and Neapolitan tunes, accompanied on the violin by his elderly companion. After the plate had gone around, the pair treated the diners to a last number, a song often heard in those days:

<i>Chi ha avuto, avuto, avuto</i>	Some have got, got, got
<i>Chi ha dato, dato, dato</i>	Others have given,
<i>Scordiamoci il passato . . .</i>	given, given
	Let's forget the past . . .

In the decades since that night at Alfredo's, the national knack for survival has enabled the Italians—a large part of them, at any rate—to thrive despite a sclerotic bureaucracy, a rapid succession of governments, continual strikes, a brittle infrastructure, and the terrorism of the Red Brigades. The country's overall performance in the 1970s and 1980s, though not so dramatic as the postwar "miracle" of Japan, was no less astonishing in view of the odds. Like the other losers of World War II, the former junior partner of the Axis found itself a generation later in the select club of the world's foremost industrial powers, a country discussing, among other weighty themes, what could be done to prop up the sickly U.S. dollar.

Many Italians were surprised and incredulous when told that their economy was abreast of Britain's and France's, and possibly had even surpassed one or both. Statistical indicators did not tell the whole story. Per capita incomes were much higher in Switzerland and Sweden, but if Northern Italy alone had been in the running, it would have been recognized as one of the most prosperous and dynamic areas in Europe, whereas much of the Mezzogiorno had Third World aspects and pulled down the statistics for Italy as a whole.



The international success of Italy's economy and creativity was unplanned. Markets, customers, and audiences throughout the world were not conquered by disciplined legions of salesmen and propagandists that a Roman economic and cultural empire might have ordered to march out on strategic roads; nor was there a Vatican of Italian *dolce vita* sending missionaries to the corners of the earth to convert remote peoples to its creed. There was nothing that could be compared with the aggressive export strategy of Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry.

The businessmen, financiers, movie directors, restaurant chefs, pizza cooks, couturiers, designers, wine shippers, and gelato makers who won foreigners over to their products and services had, unlike their Japanese counterparts, received scant if any help and encouragement from their home authorities. In Italy itself anyone who has a new idea, who tries to leave the well-trodden paths and wants to set up a novel enterprise, must ignore or circumvent the thickets of laws and regulations that postwar Italy has been cultivating as if to make sure all personal initiative is thwarted, and moreover must cope with the most ramshackle of infrastructures.

The Italian bureaucratic machineries—both public and private—are as enervating as the sirocco wind that frequently dumps Sahara sand on the country, and as baroque as a dilapidated Neapolitan palazzo. The nation's battered railroads are almost always late. Italian mails are outrageously unreliable and the telephones capricious and expensive. Local banks need a month to clear a check written elsewhere in the same country. Cities from Turin to Palermo are plagued by perpetual traffic jams; in Naples they are as vicious as those in Lagos, Nigeria. To top it all, Italy has for decades held the world record in numbers of working hours lost through strikes, and its public services are chronically disrupted by labor conflicts.

Add to this an all-pervasive political patronage system, proverbially weak and unstable governments, widespread corruption as evidenced by an unending chain of scandals, and the sinister power of the Mafia, and one can see how an entrepreneur requires uncommon energy, resourcefulness, and courage, besides a good deal of cynicism, to thrive in Italy. These are, it is true, qualities that Italians have honed through the ages. And they may be equally useful to someone trying today to establish a foothold in duller countries.

An outstanding industrialist and financier, Carlo De Benedetti, describes Italy as schizophrenic—one aspect of its split personality is its cumbersome government machinery, the other the dynamism of its private business. Each nation on earth, to be sure, groans under its own burden of bureaucrats, and Italians who ought to know will tell you that the red tape in any leading democracy is at times no less daunting than are the mechanisms of repression in dictatorships or the incompetence, greed, and arrogance of the panjandrums in newly independent countries. But Italians are also justifiably convinced that they are shackled by the most inept state apparatus of any large industrial society outside the Communist orbit—by administrative structures and practices far less efficient than those in the United States, Japan, West Germany, Britain, and France. An Italian premier, Giovanni Goria, addressing the editors in chief of leading newsmagazines in various countries, candidly admitted, "Our bureaucracy is slow, costly, useless. . . . Italy is not a modern nation," at least, he added, not outside its well-run industrial plants.

Because of the long and checkered history of Italy, many traditions, inveterate habits, and ingrained attitudes are invisibly stifling the atmosphere of offices that may today be air-conditioned and equipped with state-of-the-art electronic gadgetry. The legalism of ancient Rome; the Byzantine mania for impressive titles and procedural flourishes; the majestic



slowness and hierarchical paternalism of the Holy See; the quirks of French, Spanish, and Austrian rulers; and the insolence of homegrown despots and oligarchies up and down the peninsula and in the islands all are strands in the bureaucratic webs of present-day Italy.

Distaste for an officialdom that for hundreds of years has served alien masters or—in the former States of the Church—a self-centered and bumbling theocracy is innate in most Italians; in contrast, many of the nation's bureaucrats betray something like distrust if not contempt for the citizenry. Anyone who is forced to deal with the drab machinery of the Italian state, if only at the post office, ends up in a bad mood. One is kept waiting in long lines, snarled at, and often sent away empty-handed; underlings are usually surly or outright rude, higher-ups inaccessible.

Foreign tourists who have the none-too-rare misfortune of discovering that their wallet has been lifted by a pick-pocket on a crowded bus, or of having their handbag snatched by a youngster on a motor scooter, and who then go to the police station to report what has happened, are in for a shock. They will be asked to supply the place and date of their birth, the name of their father and maybe also the maiden name of their mother (still alive? dead?), all of which will be laboriously recorded; they will also be questioned about what they are doing in Italy anyway, and may get the feeling of being vaguely considered suspects. Eventually the *brigadiere* (sergeant) who has conducted the interrogation will nonchalantly put the new file on top of a high stack of similar ones.

The majority of Italian administrators, judges, police officers, and other public functionaries are today being recruited from the nation's South, where feudal patterns of life die hard. All too often southerners raised in modest circumstances who with great efforts and thanks to intricate maneuvers conquer the tiniest crumb of official power will by

instinct regard the ordinary citizen as a subject who must be made to feel the weight of authority, ought to show proper respect to its representatives, and had better learn to be humble and patient. The cliché of the always good-natured Italian (whose embodiments can be met often enough) does not normally apply to the sunny country's morose public employees.

Many of the higher positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy require a law degree, and as far as that qualification is concerned Southern Italy is able to fill any demand. Families in the Mezzogiorno who can afford college education for their children will most often urge them to attend law school as a stepping-stone toward a decorous post in the state apparatus. Comparatively few young people from Northern Italy (other than southern immigrants or their offspring) seek government employment. Southerners are thus usually left to compete with one another in the scramble to get on the public payroll.

Every so often the newspapers report on the contests for vacant state, regional, or municipal jobs that have to be held, at least pro forma, to comply with the law; they sound like the New York Marathon. For 411 subaltern posts in the city administration of Messina, 50,450 candidates apply; tests to narrow down the field to 5 competitors for each opening take place during three weeks; the finals to select the winners among the remaining 2,055 take another week; the results won't be known for months. For, say, a handful of vacancies in the sanitation department in Catanzaro or for the police in Cagliari, thousands of applicants will turn up. Sometimes the throng of job seekers is so vast that the authorities rent the local stadium for the elimination quizzes.

Before being admitted to the tests all candidates will have filled out lengthy questionnaires and submitted many pieces of paper—birth and residence certificates, school reports, po-



lice statements that they have never had any trouble with the law, and, for the men, attestations that they have fulfilled their military obligations. Some applicants won't mention that they have a degree in law or the humanities when they put in for a street cleaner's or gravedigger's job; they reckon that once they are hired they will eventually worm into some bureaucratic niche with its own desk on the strength of their academic education and, much more important, with the backing of powerful sponsors. No wonder that from time to time the nation learns again, without surprise, that of the thousands of employees in the sanitation departments of Naples or Palermo only a couple of hundred are actually in the streets on any given day, while the others may be found in the offices and corridors of city departments, or simply have better things to do and will show up only to collect their pay.

Publications containing nothing but information on forthcoming contests for civil service and other official positions, and on the conditions for participating in them, are prominently displayed by virtually every newsstand from Rome southward. One of these sheets, a fortnightly, carries the lapidary name *Il Posto*; the Italian word conveys a sense of job security even though "the post" may be a lowly one. Not only thousands of job hunters in their twenties and thirties but also the parents and girlfriends or boyfriends of unemployed young people buy every issue of *Il Posto*: "Instead of watching television and listening to rock music all day, why don't you put in for one of those jobs in the Bari city hall? You have nothing to lose, and, who knows, you may win!"

Thousands of young Italians, above all in the South, are listed as applicants in half a dozen employment contests at the same time. To bone up for the tests, many candidates buy or borrow manuals with sample questions and answers: Name

three outstanding Italian poets! (Dante, Ariosto, and Leopardi will do.) Write three sentences describing the tasks of the national Parliament! What does the expression *air pollution* mean? Multiply 849 by 63! The quizzes usually have little to do with the job at stake, but the idea is that a gravedigger too should possess a minimum of intelligence and knowledge.

In nearly every contest a few competitors seem to know beforehand what they will be asked, and everybody is convinced that the quizzes are an empty rite, a tedious and costly charade that has to be played out even though the winners are actually picked under ancient rules of influence and patronage. Thus, as job seekers file their birth certificates and school reports, their relatives and friends are enlisting the help of powerful personages—politicians, generals, prelates of the church, maybe mafiosi—directly or through friends of friends. Who will deny a *raccomandazione*, a few lines of introduction and character reference, to a voter whose daughter aspires to a high-school teacher's job in Frosinone? Leaders of political parties and ministers in the government keep platoons of secretaries busy writing such letters. The trouble is that the tens of thousands of such "recommendations" always being showered on the organizers of job contests cancel one another out.

A labor leader, Daniele Mengoni, recalls that when he, earlier in his career, was chief of the personnel department of the prime minister's office, five messenger jobs were to be filled in the usual competitive process; he received fifty-six letters recommending individual candidates—all signed by the prime minister. A sponsor who really wants to get results will at the least have to make a personal follow-up telephone call, indicating readiness to trade favor for favor.

Periodically some newspaper crusader or would-be reformer denounces the plague of "recommendations" and fails to stir up public outrage. After all, virtually everybody has



at least a cousin who got hired by the national health service, the Carabinieri Corps, or the state broadcasting system through the intervention of an archbishop, a member of Parliament, or some other power broker. Remo Gaspari, a Christian Democratic politician who by diligent and unstinting patronage over many years built a formidable voting machine in his native Abruzzi region and served as a minister in a number of national governments, told an interviewer that he didn't get jobs for any protégés of his; all he did, he explained, was to "reassure people, for instance by informing a candidate in some job competition of the favorable outcome of the tests, possibly a minute before the official announcement." It should be noted that the several government departments that Gaspari headed during his long service in public life included the Ministry of Bureaucratic Reform.

Not all contests for state jobs are rigged. A friend of mine who lived in the United States for years and earned a master's degree in history from New York University applied for a post as an English teacher at a high school in a town near Venice after returning home. She was first hired on a temporary basis and after a few years was admitted to a competition for a tenured position as a language teacher in the school system. In a written test she had to produce an essay on the American Revolution, and in an oral examination a full year later she was asked questions about Italian history from antiquity to the present. "I passed and won the job," she told me, "without any *raccomandazione* but with plenty of suspense and cramming for the orals—all for 1,100,000 lire a month [about \$900 at the time]."

Private corporations also test job applicants, but far fewer candidates turn up for these tests than for the contests for public employment, even though the pay at stake is considerably higher. Every weekend the country's newspapers are filled with advertisements whereby industrial firms search for

graduates from technical colleges, systems analysts, accountants, and other specialists. Most of those who answer the want ads are eliminated in the screening process because they lack the necessary qualifications. A multinational computer firm looking for technical personnel in Milan quizzed thirty applicants, all recent graduates from polytechnic colleges; when they were asked the comparatively simple question How does a transistor work? only one of them gave a satisfactory answer. She was immediately hired. Other industrial companies have similar experiences: In a country where almost every young person who carries a briefcase is styled a *dottore* (doctor), marketable advanced skills are rare. A *dottore* may have a degree in medicine, law, or psychology or may be a graduate from any one of scores of other academic courses. The title means very little.

Only in the mid-1980s did Italy's bloated system of higher education attempt to overcome the national crisis that had started with the European student rebellions of 1968. From France, academic unrest spilled quickly into Italy that year, leading to rioting, sit-ins, and violent protests. Partly as a result, the Italian Parliament in 1969 passed legislation aimed at wiping out social-class distinctions in education: It permitted any high-school graduate to go on to any state college or university without an entrance exam. The consequence was an academic explosion. Whereas there were 270,000 university students in Italy in 1960, their number a quarter of a century later had quadrupled.

A good deal of Italy's school violence in the late 1960s occurred in the graffiti-covered high schools, but the effects were soon felt in the universities too. Teenage student radicals fought for years for what was to become a system of virtually automatic passing grades. Militants engaged in a sociocultural revolution, so the ultraleft argument went, should not be bothered with *nozionismo*, the accumulation of such allegedly



useless knowledge as the dates of the battle of Cannae or Waterloo or the formula for determining the area of a triangle. In numerous circulars after 1968, the government's education authorities directed high-school teachers to take into consideration the entire personality, intellectual commitment, and mental process of a student, not just his or her performance on a specific test. This was an implicit rejection of *nozionismo*, and it encouraged students to cultivate the old Italian penchant for rhetoric—if you don't know the correct answer to a question, keep talking, talking; maybe you will convince the examiner that you are smart.

The "maturity examination," the once-dreaded set of tests for high-school graduation, became a mere formality, and the increasingly large proportion of students who easily sailed through it went on to institutions of higher learning. Overcrowding strained all academic facilities. In the mid-1980s the State University of Rome, which carries the historic name La Sapienza (Wisdom), had an enrollment of 160,000. Some professors lectured to audiences of more than 1,000. Rome's medical school was supposed to train 23,000 students concurrently; many of them never made it to the dissecting table during exercises. To secure a library seat, students had to line up early. Most of the 160,000 enrolled in La Sapienza found it wise to show up only for tests, for which they had prepared at home, learning by rote every word in mimeographed aids that provided an extra income to university teachers. Things were not very different in other college towns in the country.

Only one-third of all students who enroll in Italian institutions of higher learning ever graduate; the other two-thirds remain "professional students," eventually dropping out to look for some job or swell the unemployment statistics. Nevertheless, there are legions of fresh *dottori* every year, especially doctors of law and of economy and commerce (a

catchall degree). Prospective employers evaluate diplomas the way wine connoisseurs read the labels of Chianti or Bordeaux vintages: Any degree granted before 1968 is acceptable, and some issued from the mid-1980s on are passable too, because academic requirements have been tightened again. On the other hand, parchments attesting that a physician, lawyer, or other *dottore* was studying and taking exams in the decade and a half that followed 1968 are accorded a low rating.

The temporary decline in academic standards caused Italy—which had produced Galileo, Volta, Marconi, and Fermi—to fall back in the sciences. The extent to which research suffered can be deduced from the small number of new Italian patents registered abroad: Only 1.0 percent of all patents granted in the United States are Italian, against a Japanese share of 7.5 percent. In Europe, 26.0 percent of all registered patents are American, 23.6 percent German, 15.0 percent Japanese, and 3.1 percent Italian. Many Italian pharmaceutical, chemical, and other companies pay licensing fees to foreign patent owners because they are using technical processes and designs that were developed abroad.

Research and development have lately been stepped up in Italy in an effort to catch up with advanced technology, but institutions of higher learning keep churning out *dottori* in law, philosophy, political science, and economy and commerce, especially in the Mezzogiorno. All too many of them expect the taxpayers to support them for the rest of their lives, as do many thousands of new high-school graduates who look for public employment right away.

Some of the innumerable southerners who seek posts in the state administration apply for admission to job contests in Northern Italy, where a real demand for mail and railroad employees, teachers, and other public personnel exists. Yet many of those who—thanks usually to the interventions of influential personages—succeed won't stay long in the North.



After a year or so they will petition their superiors for transfer to their hometowns in Calabria or Sicily to rejoin their families (aged parents and unmarried sisters left behind, or spouses acquired during a vacation and already producing and raising children). There is no legal provision entitling Italian state employees to serve where they were born, grew up, or have a family, yet people on the public payroll regard it as their right to be sent back to their province or even their town of origin. Their requests to be moved will be reinforced by new avalanches of "recommendations" from sponsors old and new. "To deal with those demands has in some notoriously disorganized branches of the government services, like the mails, the railroads, and the schools, become a predominant task," says Massimo Severo Giannini, who also once served as minister of bureaucratic reform. Railroad workers have staged strikes to win official recognition of their claims to be retransferred to their hometowns.

The results of all these maneuvers are many post offices in the South populated by staffs far too large for what little mail there is to sort and distribute, southern schools with more teachers than students, and railroad stations that see only a few local trains passing through every day staffed by half a dozen signalmen and another half a dozen ticket agents. And all the while, business executives in the North keep complaining that important letters are being delayed or lost, only to be told, alas, their post office is shorthanded right now but don't worry, another contest for selecting new employees will be held soon.

With 200,000 transfer petitions from teachers pending at any time, 100,000 from postal employees, and 20,000 from railroad workers, as well as many more from other government personnel, it looks as if a major—maybe the main—task of Italy's awesome bureaucratic machinery is to administer itself. Nobody knows even approximately how many people

the Italian taxpayer has to maintain—estimates run to at least 4 million, or one out of every five or six Italian wage earners. Yet the nation that on paper seems overadministered is suffering, as leading Italians point out almost every day, from deplorable public services. Whenever the state television devotes a few minutes to the country's bureaucracy, it shows some post office or tax center, the camera zooming over long lines or thick clusters of people—video shorthand for the frustrations of ordinary citizens who have to deal with a state apparatus that seems sadistic but is only inept. While the residents of Communist countries are all the time lining up to secure a few oranges, sausages, or stockings because the central planners are incapable of foreseeing and fulfilling consumer needs, Italians, who don't have to worry about food or apparel, stand in line for many hours to pay or receive money or to trade pieces of paper with the authorities.

Youngsters are initiated to the rites of the Italian *fila* (line) when they line up during long and noisy hours for college registration or induction into the armed forces. They will have to learn patience and cunning to survive the innumerable lines in which they will be wasting time over the rest of their lives—lines for paying fees, utility bills, and taxes; for getting the many official certificates they will then have to hand to other bureaucrats after waiting in other lines; for cashing checks or withdrawing money from their bank accounts; for buying railroad tickets or checking in at airports; for sending registered letters, getting building permits or business licenses, seeing a doctor or being admitted to a hospital; and once retired, for collecting their monthly pensions. Even the dead have to wait, because many big-city cemeteries are overcrowded and a *raccomandazione* is needed to get a burial plot weeks or even months after a person's demise.

Lining up comes harder to Italians, a vivacious and undisciplined people, than it does, for instance, to Britons or



Germans. Watch any bus stop: At rush hour there is a throng, and everybody pushes and shoves to get in before passengers waiting to get off have a chance. This is, with little variation, the normal scene from San Remo in the northwest to Syracuse in Sicily's southeast. In Valletta, the capital of Malta, just 60 miles from Syracuse, people form orderly lines at bus stops the way it is done in London. The Maltese are ethnically and culturally close to the Sicilians, but their island was a British colony and naval base for a century and a half.

Lately lines have been proliferating in Italy, for its people too have to learn, however reluctantly, to stand in line and wait their turn instead of crowding and bickering. Yet someone in every post office or bank will always jockey for a better position, try to outflank others in line, or brazenly rush forward to the counter and barge in on whatever business is being transacted to ask "just a quick question" or breathlessly announce an emergency. The other people in the line will protest loudly, and a shouting argument may ensue, causing everybody to waste additional time. At toll plazas along the highways some car will inevitably surge from behind to squeeze into the front of the line.

The victims of the *fila* are not only the applicants, who have to spend hours lining up in understaffed offices, but also the few employees behind the windows or counters, who soon become gruff and irritable. If one of them has to take a break for a couple of minutes, there is exasperated muttering among the people outside. Small wonder that some functionaries seem to take delight in telling a customer that his postal order is improperly filled in and cannot be accepted, that her appeal against the income tax assessment has to be presented on the floor above, or that the duplicate of a driver's license lost or stolen a year ago still isn't ready. The nasty mood in many offices intended to serve the public is a piece of Italy that tourists usually don't see.

Many foreigners who settle in the country because they like the climate, the art, the food, and the jovial people never get around to registering as they should after staying for three months, when they can no longer claim to be tourists. They are supposed to report to the *questura*, the police headquarters in cities and major towns. (The word *questura* is one of several echoes from antiquity that still reverberate in present-day Italy's bureaucratic language. In classical times the *quaestores* dealt principally with financial affairs rather than police matters.)

At the foreigners' office of the *questura*, the newcomer will find scores, maybe hundreds, of other aliens who have been told, as official parlance puts it, to "regularize their position" and get their residence permits. There will be maids and nannies from the Philippines and the Cape Verde Islands, pizza cooks from Tunisia or Egypt, au pair girls from Britain or the Netherlands who have found an Italian boyfriend and want to stay on indefinitely, Brazilian dancers, farm workers from Eritrea or Sri Lanka, souvenir peddlers from Senegal, and refugees from Eastern Europe. Theoretically, all need a residence permit to be allowed to work, and a work permit to obtain a residence permit. Many of the applicants will have been illegally harvesting artichokes or tomatoes for farmers, or washing dishes in restaurant kitchens for months and years, and are no longer willing to do tedious work at miserable nonunion wages. They may also be after the free medical treatment available under the national health plan, for which one also needs residence papers.

More than a million foreigners are now living permanently in Italy, and several hundred thousand of them—nobody knows how many—do not officially exist because they have never shown up at a *questura*. The majority of these belong to the army of immigrants from the Third World who arrive as "tourists," then stay on and take jobs that most



Italians spurn even if unemployed. The authorities leave the clandestine workers and their families alone most of the time and do not object if they send their children to local schools. Every so often police catch a drug runner from Colombia, an exotic pickpocket or robber (most of the pickpockets that the Rome police catch red-handed on the city's buses turn out to be foreigners), a prostitute or pimp from Latin America, or a gypsy thief who has come in a battered car from Yugoslavia. They lock them up for some time and order them to leave the country; many are back within weeks.

Expatriates from Western countries who have never registered and are therefore technically outside the law may pick up a few lire as baby-sitters, language teachers, models, tourist guides, or in other temporary jobs. Nonpersons to the tax office, the health service, and other branches of the bureaucracy, they enjoy one advantage, not having to wait countless hours in line.

Italy's most authoritative sociological research institution, CENSIS (Center for Social Investment Studies), has tried to put a price tag on the time wasted by lining up in the nation's public offices. After interviewing sample groups of citizens, CENSIS experts concluded that tens of billions of dollars' worth of working time was lost by standing in the *fila* every year. In 1968 Parliament passed a law whereby a citizen is entitled to "self-certification" by substituting a single affidavit for the many documents that bureaucrats usually want to see. The law has never really gone into effect, although there have been several attempts to make it work. Parents must still line up in half a dozen offices for the necessary certificates to have a child admitted to kindergarten.

Further, nobody has yet tried to quantify the waste of time and the accumulating frustrations caused by the many invisible waiting lines in which millions of Italians are

trapped. If you sue somebody for payment of a debt or become a party to some other legal proceeding, you are lucky if a verdict is forthcoming in thirty months; even then there will usually be an appeal. Many court matters—civil actions and criminal cases alike—drag on for ten years or longer. In one judicial grotesquerie a court in Catanzaro (in Italy's toe) was in 1989 still trying defendants accused of having perpetrated a 1969 bombing in a Milan bank in which sixteen people died. After long pretrial investigations the hearings opened in Rome in 1972, soon moved to Milan, and eventually were transferred to Catanzaro, 760 miles to the south, because the judges in Milan were deemed possibly biased. Six years later the Catanzaro court imposed life sentences on two defendants; an appeals court annulled the verdict and acquitted the accused for "lack of evidence." The highest tribunal in criminal matters, the Court of Cassation, ordered a retrial in the southern city of Bari, but the defendants were again acquitted in 1984. Meanwhile, investigators had come up with a new set of suspects, and the Catanzaro court started trying *them*, apparently unconcerned about the reliability of witnesses and other evidence two decades after the fact.

Almost two-thirds of the 30,000 to 40,000 people crowding Italian prisons at any one time have not been tried, and many of these who are eventually cleared won't receive any compensation for the time they have served. Of 203,000 defendants in criminal trials in 1986, fewer than 114,000 were found guilty and received prison sentences or were fined; more than 89,000 were acquitted. A reform law enacted in the early 1980s established that prisoners who had not been given a final sentence after four years of detention must be set free without bail pending the disposition of their cases. Thus thousands of alleged criminals who had never been tried or had appealed to higher courts regained their liberty, and the police got the additional task of keeping an eye on them.



Most other societies afflicted with a cumbersome state machinery have sunk into stagnation and sullenness, as has happened under the world's Marxist regimes. The Italians, with their knack for coping with adversity, have instead been thriving—not only despite the *fila* and horrendous bureaucratic delays but also in the teeth of social and governmental structures seemingly designed to frustrate efficiency.

## 4. *Red Tape and Anarchy*



The Italian citizen who requests an income tax refund may have to wait four years before hearing from the fiscal authorities; their shelves bulge with 12 million unexamined claims. Getting money out of the government is always hard, even if it has long been promised or allocated. Public-works contractors whose bills remain unpaid often have to run to banks or other lenders to keep going, as do Italy's thirteen state-supported opera houses and symphony orchestras when the funds to which they are entitled are late. Civil servants and teachers who have retired may have to wait ten or more years to learn the exact amount of the pensions due them (meanwhile, they get periodic advances).

State pensions are paid by the post offices in cash toward the end of each month. Occasionally some postal branch office will be closed because of a strike, or it will run out of funds, or the armored truck with the money will be waylaid and robbed (it does happen once in a while). The pensioners are told to come back some other day.

Italy's public and private bureaucracies are by and large equipped with data-processing systems, but people keep complaining that the computers of the labyrinthine Social Welfare Agency and many of the state-controlled banks seem to